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ABSTRACT

"Language Skills in English," a three-year project designed to explore the application of mastery learning techniques to solve the reading and writing problems of secondary school students in Scotland, is discussed in this paper. Background information provided in the first section of the paper concerns the context of the project, its aims, and its proposed implementation in three trial schools. Other sections of the paper offer syllabus and assessment guidelines in English at foundation level, formative and diagnostic assessment procedures, information on the use of a mastery learning approach to teach reading and writing processes, and a proposed classroom methodology to be used in the project. (RL)

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CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

LANGUAGE SKILLS IN ENGLISH

READING AND WRITING AT FOUNDATION LEVEL

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READING AND WRITING AT FOUNDATION LEVEL : A MASTERY LEARNING APPROACH

Paper presented at the Conference of the United Kingdom Reading Association, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, July 1981.

Colin Peacock

The paper that follows presents in outline the rationale that underpins the curriculum development project *Language Skills in English* at the University of Stirling, providing background information concerning the context of the project and a discussion of its aims and proposed implementation in three trial schools to begin in August 1981.

1. Background to the Project

The Stirling *Language Skills in English* project is a small-scale investigation funded by the Scottish Education Department as part of national developments in education in the fields of curriculum and assessment in secondary schools, following the publication in 1977 of the Munn and Dunning Reports.[1] It will explore over a period of three years (from January 1981) the application of mastery learning techniques to some of the reading and writing problems being experienced by pupils following pilot "Foundation Level" courses in English (S3-S4 : aged 14-16) in three secondary schools in Central Scotland.

If proposals for the reform of the curriculum and assessment procedures in Scotland are eventually accepted for implementation (from 1984), pupils in classes in the final two years of compulsory schooling will be grouped and assessed in three broad bands of ability for each course followed - at Credit, General and Foundation Levels. To date, preparatory work has been carried out throughout Scotland to test the feasibility of mounting courses (in English, mathematics and science) for the "least able" pupils at Foundation Level and guidelines have been published by the Scottish Education Department (in February 1981) for syllabus and assessment at Foundation Level in these three subjects.[2]

The Stirling project does not aim to provide a total two-year programme of work in English at Foundation Level, nor does it seek to define the nature of pupils likely to be following such courses.

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Instead we plan to develop in collaboration with teachers in the three trial schools *classroom materials and strategies* which seek to improve pupils' mastery of "basic skills" in reading and writing and eventually to offer these to teachers for use in schemes of classroom work developed in accordance with the national guidelines. We hope that these materials and strategies may also prove of use to pupils of a much wider age and ability range than its immediate target audience in "Foundation" classes.

In formulating our conceptualisation of "basic language skills" we decided that it was essential that we should take into account:

(a) the rationale which underpins current good practice in the teaching of English in Scottish secondary schools as set out in the Syllabus and Assessment Guidelines

(b) the oral accounts offered by teachers of English who are at present working (or have recently worked) with "non-certificate" pupils in our three pilot schools as regards their judgements and actions in developing pupils' reading and writing skills.

Interviews with teachers in the three schools were carried out by the project's Research Fellow, Angela Roger, during May and June 1981 and are at present being analysed.

From August 1981 we begin to work pragmatically in the classrooms of three teachers (one in each of the trial schools), seeking to identify key problem areas and gradually developing a limited range of materials and classroom strategies in response to the needs of the teachers and pupils with whom we will be working. Six teachers (two from each school) have been involved through discussion in the development of the project's theoretical rationale since its inception in January (the three teachers in whose classrooms we will be working together with three held "in reserve").

2. Syllabus and Assessment Guidelines in English at Foundation Level

The model of language proposed by the national guidelines and accepted by a progressive consensus of English teachers in Scotland presents an organic view, conceptualising linguistic competence as a process of development "in the context of experiences that contribute to the learner's personal growth" (Guidelines 2.3). Such a model accepts the inter-relationship of the four language modes, with development in one mode being dependent on and encouraged by development in another (Guidelines 1.3).

Such a model is clearly not consonant with the production of a series of decontextualised exercises which offer explanation and practice in reading and writing skills with the aim that what is learned in completing the exercises will generalise to other reading and writing tasks. Consequently we are proposing that any materials and strategies we develop in the course of the project should be finally organised as a resource bank, available to teachers and pupils throughout the Foundation course, to enable pupils to work (on their own, in small groups or with the teacher) on problems in reading and writing, as they arise from their own work during the course.

Because of the magnitude of our task, we propose to give close attention initially to pupils' writing, since the products which result from this mode will be available to use in a permanent form and the problems which pupils are experiencing should prove easier to identify than is the case with reading.

Teachers in our three trial schools will proceed with their normal classroom work in their accustomed teaching styles, planning and implementing units of work (or discrete lessons) and providing activities for pupils which involve listening and speaking, reading and writing. And the language activities that evolve in their classrooms are likely to be planned (following Appendix Two of the Guidelines) with the aim of offering pupils varied purposes, audiences and contexts for their communication.

The project team propose to intervene and assist *after* the point has been reached in a sequence of classroom work where pupils have produced first drafts of their intended written communication and teachers proceed to the stage of *formative assessment* in responding to this work.

3. Formative and Diagnostic Assessment

The Guidelines rightly emphasise the importance of assessment procedures that are formative and diagnostic:

> *Many pupils taking a Foundation Course are likely to have had experience of learning difficulties in English and a sense of failure in part related to assessment which concentrated on weaknesses rather than strengths. Assessment in a Foundation Course should promote confidence, identify needs, measure progress and assist the planning of learning. It has 4 inter-related purposes. The most important of these is to help the teacher and the pupil find ways of improving the pupil's learning.....* (4.1)

We accept (and our collaborating teachers have already emphasised) the importance of reinforcing success in formative assessment rather than concentrating on failure and weakness, but we see it as an essential function of this project to provide teachers with assistance in identifying and describing pupils' problems in their reading and writing activities and to offer varied materials and learning strategies to help each pupil improve.

If the starting point of our own research is to be pupils' writing, then, as the Guidelines state, the sequence and degree of help to be offered to pupils are "key factors" (3.7.5). The sequence of events recommended in the Guidelines is as follows:

(a) Stimulus be means of talk, text, outside visit (etc.)
(b) Discussion preparatory to writing
(c) Model of the type of writing proposed (optional)
(d) First draft of writing undertaken by each pupil
(e) Detailed attention to the first draft before a redraft is undertaken

We believe that the final stage in the above sequence is the crucial one as far as the present project is concerned. Formative assessment should offer an analysis of strengths and weaknesses in the first written draft and advice and practical help concerning how specific weaknesses can be overcome so that the second written draft may be made more effective. Clearly this process can be (and often is) successfully carried out intuitively and informally by means of discussion between teacher and individual pupil. On the other hand, with a class of, say, twenty-five pupils, we accept also the reality of the pressures on the teacher's time and the impossibility of him/her being able to give adequate time and help to every pupil in this way.

We see it, then, as an important task for the present project to offer a framework which can be readily accepted and understood by both teachers and pupils and which will help them (both) to identify quickly an area of weakness in a piece of writing so that a teacher can direct an individual pupil to a series of tasks and activities (or the pupil can seek them voluntarily) which help to clarify a particular problem and overcome a specific weakness before he/she begins to redraft his/her own written work. In other words, we hope to ensure that formative assessment becomes more systematic and effective for all pupils in "Foundation" classes than is at present the case.

Within the area of formative assessment, therefore, we are proposing the following sequence of events:

(i) Production of each pupil of an individual first written draft
(ii) Formative assessment (carried out by teacher or pupil or both) that identifies and reinforces success
(iii) Formative assessment that identifies one area of weakness (unless the work needs no improvement)
(iv) Direction of pupil to one or more work-cards that offer individual or small-group activities to improve understanding and develop skills and self-confidence in this one area of weakness. (Alternatively the pupil may select for himself/herself a card that seems appropriate to his/her problem).
(v) Return of pupil to original piece of work to redraft.

The classroom teacher will undoubtedly have an essential role in this sequence of events in ensuring its smooth management and in offering incidental help and support to individual pupils.

Our interpretation of the term *diagnostic assessment* differs somewhat from that offered in the Guidelines where this form of assessment is defined as the identification of "the causes of an individual's specific learning difficulties" and where it is seen as being a means of helping the teacher to assist each pupil in overcoming these difficulties (4.1). We wish to place much less emphasis on understanding the *causes* of a pupil's specific problems and, instead, we propose to encourage our collaborating teachers to give close attention to the *products* which emanate from their pupils' writing activities. We believe that this approach (in conjunction with the formative procedures already outlined) may prove more fruitful in the context of the normal classroom where it is difficult and perhaps unrealistic

unrealistic to attempt to fathom the complex *processes* that bring about the eventual symbols that appear on each pupil's first written draft.

Consequently we are proposing to use for the purpose of diagnosis the following *graphic* framework of the domain of writing which has been taken from the work of Professor Donald E P Smith and his fellow workers at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor).[3] The framework is related to *the writing system* and terminology will (in the main) be familiar to both teachers and pupils. It comprises:

WRITTEN DISCOURSE (i.e. forms of writing appropriate to different subjects, audiences and purposes)

PARAGRAPHS

SENTENCES

WORDS

LETTERS

CONTOURS (i.e. lines and shapes)

We anticipate that the simplest and most complex of these categories (Contours and Discourse) are unlikely to play a large part in our initial work with pupils in Foundation classes. From our discussions with teachers and initial survey of written scripts, we believe that pupils' problems are more likely to fall into the intervening categories.

4. A Mastery Learning Approach

It is clearly inappropriate to apply the term *mastery* to the reading and writing processes themselves; the mastery of each process represents a life-long task which perhaps can never be fully achieved. In addition, it is now widely accepted by teachers of English that context, purpose and audience are all of vital importance in any linguistic communication and they will rightly argue that mastery of registers and conventions appropriate to a particular context or audience does not necessarily imply mastery in different contexts and for varying purposes and audiences.

Mastery in reading and writing will not be used in the context of the present project as an all-embracing term to be applied to a whole domain or even to general areas within it(like spelling or punctuation). We wish instead to argue for a much more specific and limited interpretation of the term.

In providing remedial work in the fields of reading and writing, our rationale will encourage collaborating teachers and their pupils to progress from the pupil's total written communication to a specific problem and its remediation and then back to the total communication again. As a result of an assignment set by the teacher, a pupil will produce a piece of continuous writing in which he/she intends to communicate his/her meaning in language that is, as far as possible, appropriate to subject, purpose and audience and meets the accepted conventions of the writing system. In responding to this total language product, a teacher can comment both positively and negatively/

negatively on both the quantity and quality of what has been written, using varied criteria in the process of assessment. But it seems inappropriate for a teacher to view this total written communication in terms of either mastery or failure.

However, it does make better sense, we believe, to use the term *mastery* when referring to certain aspects of specific dimensions of a particular total written communication. And the analytic framework which we are using will provide a series of limited objectives in specific areas of the domain of writing in which mastery can be achieved. Our procedures for formative assessment, then, encourage teachers to follow this sequence of events:

(a) Move eventually (via encouragement and praise) from the pupil's first written draft with its attempt at a total communication to a particular aspect which will benefit from improvement

(b) Offer remedial activities which involve the pupil in attempts to (i) *recognise differences* between his/her own efforts in the completion of tasks or solution of problems, on the one hand, and a definitive model on the other (ii) *reproduce* this model (iii) *apply* what has been learned to a specific, limited context, and eventually to other contexts when appropriate.

By demonstrating *visible success* in each of these three areas, the pupil will be progressing through successive stages of mastery in relation to one specific problem in his/her progress towards an eventual (perhaps unreachable) goal of applying what has been learned on every occasion that he/she writes, if it is appropriate.

As already indicated, we propose to offer a general framework for the categorisation of remedial materials which is derived from written forms rather than the cognitive processes that relate to the act of writing. In other words, our graphic framework organises the domain of writing into six levels, beginning with *contours* (or the making of lines on a page), ending with forms of *written discourse* (like persuasive writing), and with the intervening stages comprising *letters, words, sentences,* and *paragraphs*.

5. Proposed Classroom Methodology

It is likely that pupils following Foundation courses will be experiencing diverse problems in reading and writing and their attitudes to school and classroom work will be equally varied. It is clear from our own school experience and our contacts with teachers of pupils in "non-certificate" classes that both these dimensions are seen as crucial as regards pupils' under-achievement in school. Some young people in their final years of compulsory education are still struggling to express themselves in writing and to read with fluency and pleasure, while others are disenchanted with school and the courses they are offered; sometimes failure and disenchantment are combined. On the other hand, some/

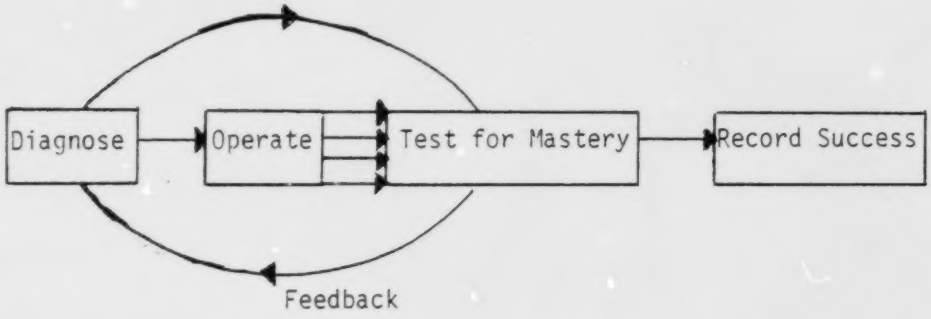
some pupils in these classes are reading and writing with comparative ease and pleasure, or work in class with interest and enthusiasm.

We do not wish to suggest that simple solutions exist to these fundamental problems of the differing levels of mastery of skills in reading and writing and poor motivation as regards school and classroom work, but we intend to explore the following approaches:

(a) We shall attempt to provide work that is individualised (or oriented towards small groups or pairs) so that pupils can work on specific areas in which weakness or failure has been diagnosed.

(b) Motivation will be derived from each pupil's recognition of his weakness in a limited and clearly defined area of reading or writing and from *visible success* in overcoming the problem.

At an abstract level the model of individualised or small-group learning we are proposing can be represented as follows:



Since, as already explained, diagnosis will attempt to identify limited, but fairly general, areas of weakness in each pupil's work in reading and writing, not to present hypotheses concerning the possible causes of a problem, nor to offer remedial strategies appropriate to one individual's specific difficulties, it follows that a *variety* of learning strategies (both deductive and inductive) must be offered so that each problem can be attacked in different ways in the hope that one approach will be appropriate to the learning style of the pupil in question. Our suggested mode of approach is much cruder than individual in-depth diagnosis followed by a remedial programme tailored to each unique need, but we believe it is more appropriate to the reality of life in classrooms.

As our discussion has already implied, apart from offering diagnosis and supportive feedback in our assessment procedures, we are also proposing that summative assessment should be *criterion-referenced*, not norm-referenced. In other words, the final record of achievement for a group of pupils following a Foundation course should *not* attempt to offer merely a comparison of one individual's general performance in the areas of reading and writing skills against another's; in punctuation, for example, we shall not be grading pupils on a four or five-point scale as a result of our knowledge of their general ability to punctuate accurately. Instead, we aim to provide eventually an individual record of achievement for each pupil/

pupil which will be organised under the general categories used in our analysis of reading and writing skills, but which will state in greater detail which skills he/she has mastered.

It is clearly possible to conceptualise and plan a bank of resource materials which offers a range of learning strategies for individual and small-group work and covers each of our three linguistic dimensions (where appropriate) at all six levels of our graphic framework. But it would represent a task well beyond the resources of the present small-scale exploratory project. Consequently, as indicated earlier, we intend to concentrate our efforts initially on the four central levels of the framework (letters-paragraphs) and to begin field work in our three collaborating schools by working pragmatically, trying to identify key problem areas and to produce a limited range of materials and classroom strategies in response to the needs of the teachers and pupils with whom we will be working.

References

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2. *The Munn and Dunning Reports : the Government's Development Programme. Syllabus and Assessment Guidelines : English - Foundation Level* S.E.D. February 1981.

3. Donald E. P. Smith and others *A Technology of Reading and Writing* (Four Volumes) New York: Academic Press (1977).

Collaborating Schools and Teachers

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